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AUTHOR Caughie, Pamela L.
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ABSTRACT

So much has been written about feminism and composition that it may seem that there is little left to be said. But one question to ask is what scholars gain by keeping up the debate--that is, instead of asking how feminism relates to composition, what should be asked is why feminism insists on a relation to composition. A look at Elizabeth Flynn's review essay on feminist composition in the February 1995 "College English" is a good place to start because many of her rhetorical moves are characteristic of much feminist scholarship. She begins by dividing feminism into types, such as feminism, cultural feminism, and postmodern feminism. Her analysis of several articles posits that the dividing of feminism into types or camps reinforces the "boundary-marking logics" of modernist knowledge, and, at the same time, generates the possibility, or rather, the inevitability of a happy alliance through the eradication or tolerance of differences. What is dangerous about this approach is that it risks reducing feminism to taxonomies that are easily mastered and shores up the profession's commitment to consensual knowledge, while reinforcing the commitment to oppositions (and its corollary, the happy alliance) that structures and limits much student writing about differences. What if the profession gave up its rhetoric of oppositions--what else might it do? It might, for one thing, interrogate its own motives for attempting to conjoin discourses; it might, for another, attend more to the politics of writing. (TB)

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"The Rhetorical Commitment to Oppositions"

Pamela L. Caughie
Department of English
Loyola University Chicago

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The topic of this session reminds me of another "hot marketable duo,"[1] feminism and postmodernism. And that duo in turn reminds me of another famous pairing of a decade ago, the once popular but now much maligned debate between American and French feminism. Once the topic of every feminist critic's attention, we are now told, even by those who made it famous, that this debate was spurious, that there never really was such a clear-cut distinction as we tried to make between a feminism informed by American empiricism and a feminism informed by French post-structuralism. In Subject to Change (1988), Nancy K. Miller laments the role she played in perpetuating such a division (which she memorably figured as stylish pumps vs. sensible shoes), and Toril Moi's once highly touted Sexual/Textual Politics (1985) has lately been excoriated by feminists (I nearly said, on both sides) for taking the distinction seriously enough to structure a book around it. (See, for example, Gallop Around 1981.) The same fate may await current "feminism and" debates, such as feminism and postmodernism, and feminism and composition. We will no sooner

[1]Linda Singer, "Feminism and Postmodernism" in Feminist Theorize the Political, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (Routledge, 1992): 472.

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enter the fray than we will find we are fighting an illusory battle. Perhaps this roundtable is the beginning of the end.

Yet I am less troubled by the fact that we once took such debates seriously than I am by the assumption that we should now be ashamed that we ever did. As someone who came of critical age during the American-French debate, I learned much from it, finding in its flashy rhetoric a way of understanding my own interests and of formulating my own practice as a feminist. So of course I took the debate seriously, but I never really believed in it, if believing in it means accepting the distinctions posited between two things as "real," as existing prior to our need to construct distinctions for a particular purpose at a particular time in relation to a particular audience.

So with the currently popular debate over the relation between feminism and composition, there is no need to believe in it really, but we may learn something by taking it seriously for a moment. And it seems we must take it seriously since so much is now being published on this topic, mostly by feminists, and most often suggesting a productive, even necessary, alliance between the two. As with that other hot duo, feminism and postmodernism, so much has been written on the topic of feminism and composition that we may feel little remains to be said. But my concern here is not to say something (more) about this relation, but to ask what we gain by keeping up the debate? Whose ends are served by asking what can be said of the relation between feminism and composition? That is, instead of asking how feminism relates to composition, I want to

ask, why does feminism insist on a relation to composition? And more generally, why does feminism ask the question of its relation to other discourses over and over again?

I want to suggest that what's at stake in efforts to link feminism with other theoretical traditions and institutional discourses is a rhetorical commitment to oppositions, manifested in the division of feminism into types, which not only structures such debates but also guarantees certain outcomes. To set up this argument, I will use Elizabeth Flynn's review essay on feminist composition in the February 1995 issue of College English. My purpose is not simply to ask, as Linda Singer does of feminism and postmodernism debates, "How can one do justice to the diversity of viewpoints, voices, and textual strategies signified by these terms [feminism and composition] while also trying to isolate specific sites of conjunction, consensus, or agreement?" (465)--though that is an important question. My point, more particularly, is that the very effort to bring together feminism and something else, whether as happy marriage or dangerous liaison, is bound up with a modern epistemology (what Susan Jarratt refers to as "boundary-marking logics"), a need to define limits and to consolidate knowledge. What "feminism and composition" reveals to me is a liberal humanism at the core of such projects, if not each discourse, which I feel reflects a reactionary position, a need to protect a fragile self or identity that grounds so much feminist and composition work and that is under threat in our postmodern and Newt-onian [sic.] age.

Flynn, who in 1988 noted the absence of feminist critiques in

composition ("Composing as a Woman"), here reviews four books that, in her words, are "the first extended explorations of composition from a feminist perspective" (210). Yet none of the four books Flynn reviews in this essay, entitled "Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition," uses "feminism" in its title. All use "gender" instead. It seems that when addressing "feminism and composition," then, we must first specify what exactly we are trying to account for. Is feminist composition about gender issues alone? How is feminism related to gender studies? Are we talking about the nature of composition studies? The nature of writing? The content of composition courses? The subject of composition? Its institutional status? Its pedagogy?

By way of specifying what "feminism and composition" means, Flynn begins by dividing feminism into types, a move characteristic of "feminism and" debates. Liberal feminism emphasizes equity between men and women; radical feminism, often separatist, emphasizes the complete transformation of culture and institutions; cultural feminism privileges women's ways of knowing that can provide social transformation; and postmodern feminism deconstructs gender categories that depend on dichotomies, emphasizing differences within rather than between. Flynn assesses the contribution of each book to feminist composition in terms of its relation to these four positions. But what her overview reveals is that in the end, all feminisms are liberal.

For example, Cinthia Gannett's Gender and the Journal situates itself within social constructionist philosophy which, Flynn says,

is closely aligned with postmodern feminism. Yet despite Gannett's reliance on theorists like Linda Brodkey, Lester Faigley, Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, the author is really more comfortable, says Flynn, with radical and cultural feminism in that Gannett focuses on men's and women's different relation to language and argues that women are more comfortable with journal writing because they have "a rich tradition of more private kinds of writing" (Gannett, qtd 206). However, according to Flynn, Gannett is best when she is integrating various and competing theories, as she does in the conclusion, and when she discusses the "healing nature of journals," the way journal writing allows for the development of an integrated self (206).

This commitment to a unity of experience characterizes the other works as well. Donnalee Rubin's Gender Influences identifies two camps within feminism, those who use gender as a weapon (for protection) and those who see it as "a unifying [or healing] force" (207). In rejecting the first position, Rubin seems to be moving, says Flynn, to postmodern feminism (emphasizing differences within) yet in the end, Rubin longs for a future where there is no difference. Similarly, Bruce Appleby in his essay in Gender Issues in the Teaching of English, a collection he coedited with Nancy McCracken, begins by asserting that men and women talk and listen differently (a cultural feminist position), then rejects such oppositional thinking that splits attributes into male and female (a postmodern position), and ends by expressing, in Flynn's words,

"a liberal feminist impulse toward equality and the eradication of difference" (204). Even Miriam Brody's Manly Writing, which from Flynn's description sounds the most postmodern of the four, in that it attends to the "agency of language," ends with a vision of "a more androgynous representation of experience" (209).

Not only in what these authors say, in their expressed desires, do we find a commitment to the values of liberal humanism, but also, and more importantly, such a commitment is evident in--indeed, is an inevitable result of--the structure of these debates over gender and writing, feminism and composition. What Flynn's review indicates--whether this is true of each of the four books or only of Flynn's effort to categorize them--is that a rhetorical commitment to oppositions that structures discussions of "feminism and something else" requires the division of feminism into "types" or "camps," which reinforces the "boundary-marking logics" of modernist knowledge, and, at the same time, generates the possibility, or rather, the inevitability of a happy alliance through the eradication or tolerance of differences. Whether such liberal values reside in each discourse (and we might debate that) or are the product of the way we frame a relation between them, what is dangerous about this liaison is that it risks reducing feminism to taxonomies that are easily mastered and shores up our profession's commitment to consensual knowledge, while at the same time it reinforces the commitment to oppositions (and its corollary, the happy alliance) that structures, and limits, so much

student writing about differences.[2]

So have I participated in this debate only to give the lie to it? Not really, but I do hope to have shown the problem with the way we frame the debate. I want to emphasize this point: In all these efforts to conjoin feminism to something else, it feels as if we are mapping relations and distinctions that our rhetoric in fact produces. This might well be called a postmodernist insight; for postmodernism is not simply another type of feminism. The project of postmodernism resists such classificatory schemes and the gesture of conceptual mastery that groups together a set of positions under a particular term.[3]

What if we gave up our rhetoric of oppositions and alliances, our taxonomies and syntheses, what else might we do? We might turn from seeking common features, intrinsic to each discourse, to

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[2]In other words, I agree with Lester Faigley's point, in Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition (1992), that writing cannot provide a way of dealing with differences and promoting social change as long as teachers hold to a modernist conception of knowledge and the subject and to the values of liberal humanism.

[3]See Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations" in Feminist Theorize the Political, 3-21.

Lester Faigley points out quite accurately that postmodern theory is suspicious of dichotomous categories, such as the tendency to label expressionist rhetoric (or "authentic voice" pedagogy) as modern and to label social constructionist philosophy (and collaborative learning pedagogy) as postmodern (17). Postmodern theory works to unravel existing categories, not to reify them. But what this often means is that we tend to label "postmodern" any writing practice or cultural phenomenon that attempts to deconstruct categories, especially categories of identity. There is, says Faigley, a great rush to label things "postmodern" despite the fact that postmodern theory is "not especially valuable for classificatory purposes" (21).

justify a relation between them, and instead interrogate our motives for conjoining them and the contexts (historical, political, institutional, cultural) in which we do so. We might attend more to the politics of writing, "to the meanings and practices linked with certain discourses" (Faigley 22), and to the possibilities and constraints of the rhetorical, cultural, and/or institutional situation in which we find ourselves.